PATTERNS OF POWER

Nature's Verdict

A Genealogy of Social Darwinism — How the Inequalities of an Age Were Made a Law of Biology

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Preface

This volume is a companion to *Second Nature*, and traces the same move in a different register. That study followed the *economic* naturalisation of hierarchy — the long sequence of warrants by which a *made* arrangement, private property and the market, was handed a fresh sanction (God, reason, labour, mathematics, evolved order) that converted it into a *nature* beyond political argument. This volume follows the *biological* naturalisation: how the inequalities of an industrialising age — of class, of wealth, of nation, of race — were made into a verdict of nature by way of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. The two genealogies share a single root in Malthus, and a single function throughout: to dress a human arrangement as a discovered law, so that the force beneath it disappears and it ceases to look like anything anyone chose.

The account is built on a thesis the reader should hold from the outset, and hold sceptically until the evidence earns it. Ideologies of this kind do not, as a rule, begin as plots. No cabal convened to design Social Darwinism and impose it on a credulous public. An idea emerges from honest enough materials — a pamphlet, a system, a science — and is then *selected*: noticed, found useful, promoted, funded, and repeated by those whose position it happens to justify, while rival ideas that serve no one powerful are left unfed. The selection of ideas has its own environment, and in a society that environment is power. This is the mechanism the volume traces, and it is offered as a sociology of knowledge, not a conspiracy theory.

An age had lost its old warrant for hierarchy. The divine right of kings was gone, the Great Chain of Being broken, the aristocracy of blood in decline; and a new order of industrial wealth had risen that held its power by no traditional title and faced inequalities wider and barer than the age of estates had shown. A scientific century would grant authority to only one kind of warrant — nature — and into that vacancy an idea was pulled. The volume follows it thinker by thinker, from Malthus to the present, and is honest at every step about what the science did and did not say, and about how contested and various the thing called Social Darwinism actually was.

The verdict is hedged from the start, and the hedge is load-bearing. The genealogy holds the genetic fallacy at full strength: to show where an idea came from is not to refute it, and nothing here impugns evolution as biology. What the genealogy disarms is one thing only — the *defence from nature*, the smuggling of an *ought* out of an *is* that places a human arrangement beyond human argument. It ends where its companion ended: by returning the verdict to politics.

A Note on This Collaboration

As throughout this series, the spine of the study is Thomas J. Bryan's and the documentary work is the model's, under the same disciplines: load-bearing specifics — dates, coinages, the exact wording of a famous sentence — are verified against the sources before they are asserted; quotations are drawn from public-domain originals (Spencer, Darwin, Galton, Sumner, Carnegie, the Buck v. Bell opinion, Kropotkin) and modern scholarship is paraphrased rather than quarried; and costs are counted on every side.

One feature of the method deserves notice in advance. The volume is deliberately unflattering to a tidy story. It declines to present Social Darwinism as a coherent right-wing plot, because the record will not bear it: the biologising of society ran across the political spectrum, eugenics was as much a cause of the reforming left as of the laissez-faire right, and a cooperative reading of Darwin was available to socialists who never took it up. These complications are reported because they are there, and because they strengthen rather than weaken the underlying claim. As ever, the volume holds its own central thesis the way it asks the reader to hold every claim that nature has spoken: as something tested, not revealed.

The Argument in Eleven Parts

I — The Warrant That Was Failing. The old sanctions for hierarchy — divine right, the Great Chain of Being — decayed, leaving a new order of industrial wealth without a title; and a scientific age would accept only one warrant for inequality: nature. An idea would be pulled into that vacancy.

II — The Root in Scarcity. Malthus wrote to refute the optimists and naturalised poverty as an iron law of numbers. His struggle for subsistence, read later by both Darwin and Wallace, planted the seed of a struggle for existence — an economist's law lent to biology, to be handed back to society with biology's prestige.

III — The Philosopher Before the Scientist. Herbert Spencer built an evolutionary philosophy of society before Darwin published, coined "survival of the fittest" after, opposed every aid to the weak as a tampering with nature, and is the true author of what is better called Spencerism.

IV — The Prestige of Science. Darwin supplied the authority of hard science. But his text was strip-mined: the struggle kept, the sympathy and cooperation he also made central left in the ground. What reached the public as "Darwinism" was a selection from Darwin made by men who knew their conclusion.

V — The Word and the Myth. The term was rare until a 1944 bestseller, written in an anti-fascist war, made it famous and fixed it to laissez-faire. The revisionists show the label was retrospective and the doctrine never unified — complications that sharpen rather than dissolve the move being traced.

VI — The Gospel of the New Men. In the Gilded Age the idea was promoted not by a cabal but by the men it justified — Spencer the celebrity, Sumner's millionaire as the product of natural selection, Rockefeller's rose, Carnegie's gospel. Utility and the means to broadcast it were enough.

VII — The Uses of Nature. The warrant did its work as a programme of refusals: against the poor law, the union, the regulation, each recast as a tampering with selection. A made inequality became a verdict of nature beyond politics, and the conversion licensed the cruelty of the withheld hand.

VIII — The Two Roads. The doctrine forked into opposite policies under one authority: Spencer's laissez-faire, where the unfit are left to die, and Galton's eugenics, where the state is summoned to breed them out. A science does not point two ways at once; a warrant does. The eugenic road ran to the sterilisation table and Buck v. Bell.

IX — Nation, Race, and the Terminus. Read as a law of peoples, the struggle scientised the contempt that licensed conquest and colony, and ran — through a racial hygiene that called itself science — to the catastrophe in which the doctrine counted its corpses.

X — The Road Not Promoted. Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* offered an equally Darwinian reading in which cooperation was a factor of evolution — and it was not taken up. The starving of one reading and the feeding of another is the thesis made visible: ideas are selected for use, not truth.

XI — The Verdict Returned to Politics. The discrediting after the camps, and the quiet return in new clothes — sociobiology, the bell curve, the market made natural. The genetic-fallacy caveat held at full strength; and the conclusion the genealogy has driven toward: the verdict of nature was a human verdict all along, and may be argued with as the political thing it is.

A Note on Sources

The volume draws on primary texts and on a large body of modern scholarship, treating the former as material to be quoted where the wording matters and the latter as material to be paraphrased rather than quarried for quotation.

The primary line. The argument rests on the texts themselves: Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798); Spencer's *Social Statics* (1851) and *Principles of Biology* (1864), where "survival of the fittest" was coined; Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871); Galton's *Hereditary Genius* (1869) and his 1883 coinage of "eugenics"; Sumner's *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883); Carnegie's "Wealth" (1889); the opinion of Justice Holmes in *Buck v. Bell* (1927); and Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902).

The historiography of the term. The fifth part stands on the revisionist scholarship that complicated Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944) — Robert Bannister's *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth* (1979), Mike Hawkins's *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought* (1997), Geoffrey Hodgson's bibliometric work, Thomas Leonard's "Origins of the Myth of Social Darwinism" (2009) and *Illiberal Reformers* (2016), and the studies of Gregory Claeys.

Eugenics, race, and the counter-reading. The later parts draw on the histories of the eugenics movement and its mainstream respectability, on the scholarship surrounding *Buck v. Bell*, on the literature connecting eugenic and racial-hygiene thought to the Nazi terminus, and on Stephen Jay Gould's "Kropotkin Was No Crackpot" (1988) and the modern biology of cooperation for the road not promoted.

The lineage. Throughout, the volume stands on its companion, *Second Nature*, whose account of the economic naturalisation it extends into the biological register, and on this project's analyses of loaded words, of revealed versus tested belief, and of the case studies — von Trotha, Rom — in which the racial warrant did its work on the ground.

PART I

THE WARRANT THAT WAS FAILING

How the old sanctions for hierarchy decayed, and why a scientific century would accept only one kind of warrant for inequality — nature itself

For the better part of a thousand years the hierarchies of Europe had carried a warrant, and the warrant was God. The king sat where he sat by divine right; the lord above the peasant, the master above the servant, occupied fixed rungs on a Great Chain of Being that ran without a gap from the worm to the angels, each link ordained, the whole of it the settled furniture of a created world. To ask why one man was born to rule and another to dig was very nearly to ask why God had made the world as it was, and the question answered itself. Inequality was not a policy. It was a fact of the cosmos, and it bore the cosmos's author as its guarantor.

That warrant decayed. The long erosion ran through the Reformation's breaking of the single church, through the scientific revolution's disenchantment of the heavens, through an Enlightenment that made reason rather than revelation the test of every claim, and then through the two great revolutions — the American and the French — that struck the king from his rung and proclaimed, in the teeth of the whole inherited order, that men were created equal and that government drew its just powers from their consent. By the early nineteenth century the divine right of kings was a museum piece, the aristocracy of blood was in visible decline, and the Great Chain had snapped. The old sanction for hierarchy was gone.

The new men without a warrant

But hierarchy itself did not go. It changed its costume. The same decades that dissolved the old order of estates raised up a new order of wealth — the manufacturers, the ironmasters, the railway men, the financiers, the *new men* of industrial capitalism, who commanded fortunes and labour forces the old nobility could not have imagined and who held their power by no traditional title whatever. They were not anointed. They were not bred. They had risen, in a single generation, from the middling sort, and the inequality they presided over — the gulf between the millionaire's palace and the labourer's cellar — was wider and more naked than anything the age of estates had shown. Such men needed a warrant as badly as any king had ever needed one, and the old warrants were no use to them. God had not ordained the cotton lord; the Chain of Being had no rung for the railway magnate.

What the age would accept, in place of God, was nature. A century that had learned to trust the laboratory over the pulpit, that took its certainties now from science, would grant authority to whatever could be shown to be *natural* — grounded not in scripture or custom but in the discovered laws of the world. This is the demand into which Social Darwinism would arrive: not a plot hatched to dupe the masses, but a vacancy in the structure of legitimation, a need for a naturalistic sanction for an inequality that could no longer call itself God-given. An idea that could fill that vacancy would not have to force its way in. It would be *pulled* in, by the want of it — promoted, amplified, and rewarded by those whose position it was found to justify, while rival ideas that served no one powerful were left to starve. The genealogy that follows is the history of that pulling-in, traced from the root.

PART II

THE ROOT IN SCARCITY

Malthus, the iron law of population, and the struggle for existence that biology would inherit

The root lies in a clergyman's pamphlet written to win an argument. In 1798 Thomas Robert Malthus published, anonymously at first, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, and he wrote it for a polemical purpose: to refute the perfectibilians of his day — Godwin, Condorcet, the optimists of the revolutionary moment — who had argued that human misery was the product of bad institutions and that better arrangements would abolish it. Malthus set out to prove the opposite, and to prove it with the cold force of arithmetic. Population, he argued, when unchecked, grows geometrically; the food supply grows at best arithmetically; and so population presses perpetually against subsistence, held back only by the *checks* of famine, disease, and want. Poverty, on this account, was not a remediable defect of society. It was a law of nature, as fixed as the multiplication table, and the misery of the poor was nature restoring a balance that no reform could repeal.

The seed of the struggle

The political uses of this were immediate, and the genealogy of private property has followed them elsewhere: the New Poor Law of 1834, with its deterrent workhouse, was justified on Malthusian grounds, for if poverty is natural then relief is futile and even cruel, a subsidy to over-breeding. But the line this study follows runs the other way, into biology. For buried in Malthus's grim arithmetic was a picture that two naturalists, reading him independently a generation later, would seize upon as the key to life itself: the picture of more organisms born than can possibly survive, and of a perpetual *struggle for existence* in which most must perish.

Charles Darwin read Malthus in 1838, and recognised at once that the relentless pressure of numbers, applied across the whole of nature and across vast time, would act as a sieve — preserving the variations that helped an organism survive and reproduce, destroying the rest. Alfred Russel Wallace, arriving at the same theory independently two decades later, credited the same source. The mechanism that would become natural selection was, in its origin, an economist's law of scarcity transposed into the living world. This matters for everything that follows, because it means the traffic between biology and political economy ran in *both* directions from the very start. The struggle for existence did not enter social thought as a metaphor borrowed from a finished science. It entered biology *as* a social idea — Malthus's idea — and would later be handed back to society wearing the prestige of the science it had helped to build. The circle was there from the beginning.

PART III

THE PHILOSOPHER BEFORE THE SCIENTIST

Herbert Spencer, who had the philosophy before Darwin had the science, and coined the phrase the age would live by

The figure most people imagine when they hear "Social Darwinism" — the thinker who took Darwin's biology and applied it to society — did exist, but he is not who they think, and the order of events is the reverse of the legend. The man was Herbert Spencer, and he had built the essential structure of his social philosophy *before* Darwin published a word.

Spencer's *Social Statics* appeared in 1851, eight years before the *Origin of Species*. In it, and in the essays that followed — "A Theory of Population" in 1852, "Progress: Its Law and Cause" in 1857 — he had already worked out a vision of the whole universe, the living world and human society alike, as governed by a single law of development from the simple toward the complex, the homogeneous toward the differentiated, the lower toward the higher. Evolution, for Spencer, was the glue of a total philosophy, and he applied it to the cosmos, the mind, and the state with equal confidence. When Darwin's book appeared, Spencer absorbed natural selection into his pre-existing system — grudgingly, and as a secondary mechanism, for he remained to the end a *Lamarckian*, persuaded that the habits and efforts of one generation were inherited by the next, and that progress came chiefly through use and striving rather than through the mere slaughter of the unfit.

The man who named it

And it was Spencer, not Darwin, who gave the age its slogan. In his *Principles of Biology* of 1864 he coined the phrase *survival of the fittest*, writing that this survival "is that which Mr. Darwin has called 'natural selection.'" The phrase was so apt, and so much more vivid than Darwin's own term, that Darwin himself adopted it into the fifth edition of the *Origin* in 1869, at Wallace's urging. The most famous three words in the whole history of evolutionary thought were not Darwin's. They were a philosopher's, and they were minted to draw a parallel — explicit in Spencer from the first — between the competition of organisms and the competition of men in an economy.

From that parallel Spencer drew the conclusions that would make his name a banner. He opposed, on principle, every public provision for the weak: the poor law, state schooling, compulsory sanitation, mandatory vaccination, public charity itself. To shield the unfit from the consequences of their unfitness was, in his view, to tamper with a beneficial process — to preserve and propagate exactly those whom nature was working to weed out, and so to drag the whole of society backward. Here, fully formed and stated in the plainest terms, was the doctrine the new men needed: a law of nature that pronounced their success deserved, the failure of the poor natural, and every attempt to soften the gulf a crime against progress. It is for this reason that the honest name for what followed is not Social Darwinism but *Spencerism* — and that the man who supplied it had his philosophy in hand before the scientist whose authority it would borrow had published at all. It is worth adding, in fairness, that Spencer himself recoiled from much that was later done in his name, and complained of being saddled with views he did not hold; the warrant, once minted, did not stay in the hand that struck it.

PART IV

THE PRESTIGE OF SCIENCE

Darwin, and how a cautious naturalist's hard science was conscripted into a doctrine of the strong

If Spencer supplied the philosophy and the phrase, Darwin supplied the thing without which neither would have conquered: the prestige of hard, demonstrated science. *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was not a tract of social opinion. It was a patient, overwhelming accumulation of evidence for a mechanism — natural selection — by which the diversity and adaptation of all life could be explained without recourse to design. Its authority was immense and, on its own ground, deserved, and it is that authority which the social application would borrow, converting a contestable claim about human society into something that seemed to carry the same unanswerable force as the descent of the finches.

What Darwin did and did not say

The conscription was not clean, and honesty requires saying so, because Darwin's own text resists the use to which it was put. In *The Descent of Man* (1871) he did extend his theory to humankind, and there are passages — on the "civilised races" and the "savage," on the action of selection among men — that the later doctrine seized upon and that modern readers find chilling. He praised his cousin Galton's work and accepted that ability "tends to be inherited." But the same book gives a central and approving place to the *social* instincts — to sympathy, cooperation, and mutual aid — as themselves products of evolution, and argues that the tribes richest in fellow-feeling would prevail over the selfish; Darwin thought our moral sense an evolved triumph, not an illusion to be discarded. He was, besides, a cautious man who hedged his extrapolations and personally recoiled from cruelty.

The point is not to enlist Darwin for the other side, but to observe the mechanism. A body of genuine science, complex and qualified, was strip-mined for the parts that served a purpose, and the parts that did not — the cooperation, the sympathy, the caution — were left in the ground. What the public received as "Darwinism" applied to society was a selection from Darwin, made by men who already knew the conclusion they wanted, and stamped with a scientific authority that the full and careful text would not have granted. This is the recurring move of the whole genealogy: the warrant is not the science; the warrant is what is taken *from* the science by those who need it, with the science's prestige attached and its qualifications discarded.

PART V

THE WORD AND THE MYTH

What Social Darwinism was and was not, and why the honest complications do not dissolve it

A genealogy that did not pause here would be a caricature, and the discipline of this series forbids the caricature. For the term "Social Darwinism" carries a history far more tangled than its confident modern use suggests, and the tangle must be set down plainly before the argument goes on.

The term and its maker

The phrase was *rare* in the nineteenth century. The men we now file under it — Spencer, Sumner — did not use it of themselves, and were scarcely ever described by it in their own lifetimes; by one careful count the label was applied to Spencer only twice before the 1940s. It owes its currency, and its fixed association with laissez-faire capitalism, very largely to a single book: Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, published in 1944, in the middle of a global war against fascism, by a young historian of New Deal sympathies who disapproved both of unregulated markets and of the use of biology in social science. The book was a bestseller, and it made the term ubiquitous — with the irony that Hofstadter himself believed the thing it named had been dead since 1918. A pejorative coined and popularised after the fact was read back onto an age that had not used it.

Later scholars — Bannister, Bellomy, Hawkins, Hodgson, Leonard — have pressed the revision hard, and their findings deserve respect. "Social Darwinism" was never a unified movement or a coherent doctrine; it was a loose family of arguments, often more Continental than Anglo-American in origin, more often concerned with the struggle between nations and races than between individuals. And — this is the complication that most unsettles the popular picture — the biologising of society was never the property of the political right alone. Many of the Progressive reformers, the men who wanted the state to act, were enthusiastic appliers of biology to society; eugenics, as the next parts will show, was as much a cause of the reforming left as of the laissez-faire right. There was even a "socialist Darwinism" that read evolution as proof that *privilege*, not nature, produced inequality. The reformer Annie Besant could declare herself a socialist precisely because she believed in evolution. Darwin was contested ground, claimed by every faction.

What survives the revision

None of this dissolves the object of the genealogy; it sharpens it. The point was never that a card-carrying sect called itself Social Darwinist and conspired in a back room. The point is the *move* — the conversion of a social arrangement into a verdict of nature — and that move was real, pervasive, and performed across the spectrum, whatever it was or was not called at the time. What the revisionists establish is that the move was a tool, not a creed: available to the laissez-faire man to naturalise the market, to the eugenic reformer to naturalise the planned improvement of the race, to the imperialist to naturalise conquest. That a tool serves many hands does not make it less a tool. It makes it more dangerous, and more worth tracing. The remaining parts follow it into the hands where it did its heaviest work — beginning with the men whose fortunes it was built to bless.

PART VI

THE GOSPEL OF THE NEW MEN

The Gilded Age, where the idea was promoted not by a cabal but by the very men it justified

Nowhere did the warrant find a readier market than in the United States of the Gilded Age, where a generation of vast new fortunes had arisen with dizzying speed and stood in want of exactly the sanction Spencer supplied. And here the central proposition of this study can be seen in the plain light of the record: the idea was not imposed on the age by a conspiracy. It was *taken up* by the men whose position it justified, who recognised its use the moment they met it and possessed, as the new lords of industry, the means to amplify it into common sense.

The celebrity philosopher and his American disciples

Spencer was, in America, not an obscure theorist but a celebrity; his books sold in the hundreds of thousands, and when he toured the country in 1882 the captains of industry feasted him as a sage. His foremost academic champion was William Graham Sumner of Yale, who carried the doctrine into the lecture hall and the popular essay. In *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883) Sumner gave the answer his title implied: nothing. The fortunes of the rich were earned; the condition of the poor was, in his cold phrase, the lot of "those who have inherited disease and depraved appetites, or have been brought up in vice and ignorance, or have themselves yielded to vice, extravagance, idleness, and imprudence." The millionaire, Sumner taught, was "a product of natural selection" — the fittest, raised up by the same impartial process that had shaped the species, and any interference on behalf of the weak was a tax on the strong and a drag on the race. It should be noted, in fairness to him, that Sumner did not intend his teaching as a mere apology for greed, and did not commit to it without qualification; but the moneyed class took from it precisely the foundation it needed.

The industrialists themselves preached the gospel in their own words. John D. Rockefeller, in a Sunday-school address, likened the growth of his combinations to the cultivation of the American Beauty rose, which can be brought to its splendour "only by sacrificing the early buds that grow up around it" — and pronounced the rise of great business "merely the survival of the fittest," "the working out of a law of nature and a law of God." Andrew Carnegie, who called Spencer his master, opened his celebrated essay of 1889 with the declaration that "the problem of our age is the administration of wealth," and accepted the law of competition, however harsh, as "best for the race" — though he softened it, in his "Gospel of Wealth," with the duty of the rich man to administer his surplus as a trustee for the public good. Harsh Sumner or gentle Carnegie, the foundation was the same: the verdict of nature had ratified the new hierarchy, and the men at its summit, finding the verdict in their favour, became its most effective evangelists. No cabal was required. Utility and the means to broadcast it were enough.

PART VII

THE USES OF NATURE

How a made inequality was converted into a verdict of nature, and what the conversion licensed

The function of the warrant was practical, and it can be stated exactly. It took an arrangement that human beings had made — the particular distribution of wealth and power thrown up by industrial capitalism, which was the work of law, contract, force, and history — and it reclassified that arrangement as a fact of nature, with the consequence that to contest it was no longer to argue politics but to defy biology. A political settlement that might be amended became a natural law that must be obeyed, and the men it favoured were placed beyond the reach of the demand that they justify themselves.

What the verdict ruled out

From this single move a whole programme followed, and it was largely a programme of *refusals*. Aid to the poor was a tampering with selection; the eight-hour law and the safety regulation were interferences with the natural relation of capital and labour; the trade union was a conspiracy against the wholesome discipline of competition; the progressive tax was a confiscation of what the fittest had naturally won. Each protection a society might extend to its weaker members could now be recast not as a kindness or a justice debatable on its merits but as a violation of a law of nature, futile at best and degenerative at worst. The cruelty the doctrine licensed was the cruelty of the withheld hand — the starvation permitted, the injury uncompensated, the child left in the mill — all of it absolved in advance by the claim that nature, not the mill-owner, had decreed it.

This is the same operation the companion genealogy traced in the economic register, and it is worth marking the join. There the warrant that converted a made market into a second nature ran from God to reason to labour to mathematics to the evolved spontaneous order; here the warrant runs through biology, through *fitness* and *selection* and *struggle*. The registers differ; the work is identical. In both, a force-backed human arrangement is dressed as a discovered nature so that the force underneath disappears and the arrangement stops looking like anything anyone chose — and so escapes the politics that might otherwise amend it. Social Darwinism is the biological chapter of a single long book: the naturalisation of hierarchy.

PART VIII

THE TWO ROADS FROM THE STRUGGLE

The fork that proves it was a warrant and not a science — laissez-faire and eugenics, opposite policies under one authority

If proof were wanted that "the survival of the fittest" was a warrant available for hire rather than a science dictating one conclusion, it is supplied by the fact that the doctrine forked, almost at once, into two roads that pointed in opposite directions — and that each road claimed the same Darwinian authority for the journey.

Spencer's road and Galton's

The first road was Spencer's, and it has been described: leave nature alone. The unfit are eliminated by the impartial action of competition; the state must stand aside and let the process work; every intervention is a meddling that preserves the weak and corrupts the stock. This was the road of laissez-faire, of the withheld hand, of the minimal state — the road the industrialists loved, because it asked of them precisely nothing.

The second road ran the other way entirely, and it was opened by Darwin's own cousin. Francis Galton, who coined the word *eugenics* in 1883 and defined it as "the science of improving stock," looked at the same struggle and drew the opposite policy. In a modern society, he argued, the natural selection that improved the species had been *suspended* — medicine, charity, and comfort now allowed the unfit to survive and breed, so that the race was decaying rather than improving. The remedy was not to leave nature alone but to *take its work in hand*: to encourage the able to marry and multiply, and to discourage, and at length to prevent, the breeding of the unfit. This was not laissez-faire at all. It demanded an active, intrusive, planning state — the very thing Spencer abhorred — and it found much of its support not on the laissez-faire right but among the reformers, the progressives, the believers in expert management of society, who embraced eugenics as a scientific instrument of social improvement. Two roads, flatly contradictory in their politics, each paved with the authority of the same biology. A science does not point two opposite ways at once. A warrant does, and serves whichever traveller has hold of it.

The road to the sterilisation table

The eugenic road was respectable, mainstream, and crowded with the eminent. Theodore Roosevelt fretted about "race suicide"; the young Winston Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, John Maynard Keynes, Alexander Graham Bell lent it their names; Calvin Coolidge, as Vice-President, pronounced that "Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races." And it reached the statute book and the operating theatre. Across dozens of American states, laws were passed for the compulsory sterilisation of the "unfit," and in 1927 the Supreme Court of the United States, by eight votes to one, upheld them. The opinion was written by Oliver Wendell Holmes, the most celebrated jurist of his age, and its reasoning was nakedly that of the warrant: "It is better for all the world," Holmes wrote, "if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind." And then the sentence that fixed the whole logic in eight words: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." Carrie Buck was sterilised; the decision was widely applauded; and tens of thousands of sterilisations followed under its sanction. The verdict of nature had moved from the lecture hall to the surgeon's table, and a nation's highest court had signed the order.

PART IX

NATION, RACE, AND THE TERMINUS

The struggle read as a law of peoples, and the road that ran to the catastrophe

The struggle could be read at the level of the individual, where it justified the millionaire and condemned the pauper. It could also be read at the level of the *group* — the nation, the race — and read so it became the most lethal warrant of the modern age. Indeed the Continental tradition from which much "Social Darwinism" actually sprang was concerned far less with competition between persons than with competition between peoples, and it is here that the doctrine did its bloodiest work.

The scientising of contempt

If the survival of the fittest was a law of nature, and if mankind was divided into races standing at different heights upon the evolutionary ladder, then the domination of the "lower" races by the "higher" was not a crime to be excused but a natural process to be assisted — and the dying-out of conquered peoples under colonial rule was merely selection taking its course. The contempt that licensed conquest and colony was old; what the doctrine added was the stamp of *science*, which converted a prejudice into a finding and a brutality into the execution of a natural law. The companion studies of this collection have shown the consequences on the ground — the genocide in South-West Africa, the garden of heads on the Congo — and what Social Darwinism contributed to those scenes was precisely the assurance, felt by the men who ordered them and the publics who tolerated them, that the victims belonged to a category nature had already marked for disappearance.

The terminus

The racial road had a terminus, and it must be named, because the genealogy would be dishonest to flinch from where the warrant finally led. Carried to its conclusion by a regime that took the biology of races as the literal foundation of the state, the doctrine of the struggle between peoples — fused with the eugenic project of purifying the stock — produced the racial hygiene of the Third Reich, the sterilisations and the "euthanasia" of the unfit, and at the end the industrial murder of those whom a pseudo-science had ruled unworthy of life. The American eugenicists had been admired in Berlin; the logic of Buck v. Bell and the logic of the racial laws were continuous. This is not to say that Darwin authored the Holocaust, which would be a slander and a falsehood; the road from the *Origin* to Auschwitz ran through a hundred human choices, and most of its travellers betrayed the science they invoked. It is to say that the warrant — the conviction that biology had pronounced a verdict on the worth of human lives, and that the state's task was to enforce it — reached, on this road, the place such warrants reach when nothing restrains them. After the camps were opened, eugenics became a word no respectable person would speak. The verdict of nature had finally shown what it cost.

Part X

THE ROAD NOT PROMOTED

Kropotkin, mutual aid, and what the starving of one reading reveals about how ideas are chosen

Throughout the whole ascendancy of the struggle there existed, in plain view and on impeccable scientific credentials, a rival reading of the very same Darwin — one that drew the opposite social lesson. That it is so little remembered, beside the doctrine of the fittest, is itself the proof of this study's governing thesis: that ideas are selected not for their truth but for their use, and that the reading which served the powerful was fed while the reading that did not was left to starve.

The factor that was not wanted

The rival was Peter Kropotkin — Russian prince turned anarchist, and a serious field naturalist — who had watched animals in the Siberian wild and seen not a perpetual gladiatorial combat but, again and again, *cooperation*: species surviving the brutal cold and scarcity not by tearing at one another but by banding together. In a series of essays gathered in 1902 as *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, he argued that cooperation was at least as powerful an engine of survival as competition — that the fittest were very often the most cooperative, and that mutual aid was as natural, and as Darwinian, as struggle. He was not a crank arguing against the science; he was making a Darwinian argument *within* it, and a modern evolutionary biology that takes kin selection, reciprocity, and symbiosis as central has substantially vindicated the claim. The palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould, surveying the matter much later, judged that Kropotkin was "no crackpot," that the gladiatorial reading had been "over-sold," and that nature in truth "offers no guide to morality" at all — being, as he put it, sometimes nasty and sometimes nice and really neither.

Kropotkin himself diagnosed the asymmetry that this study is built to expose. Living in England, he observed that the reading of the struggle for life as a war-cry of "woe to the weak" had been "raised to the height of a commandment of nature revealed by science," and had become there, he wrote, "almost a matter of religion." That is the crucial word. The competitive reading had not won because it was better science — on the science the two readings were, at worst, contestable, and the cooperative reading has aged the better. It had won because it was more *useful* to those with the power to promote a reading: it flattered the victors of the industrial struggle, it absolved the comfortable of obligation, it justified the existing distribution of wealth and rule. A Left also read Darwin, and read him as proof that privilege rather than nature made the poor; that reading, too, was available, and it, too, was not the one the age's apex chose to amplify. The selection of ideas, in short, has its own environment, and in a society the selecting environment is power. The fit idea is the one that feeds those who can feed it back. Mutual aid was true enough; it simply had no millionaire to pay for its banquet.

PART XI

THE VERDICT RETURNED TO POLITICS

The discrediting, the quiet return in new clothes, and the conclusion the genealogy has been driving toward

After 1945 the open doctrine was finished. The camps had made "eugenics" unspeakable and "Social Darwinism" an epithet; the explicit ranking of races by biology retreated from the journals and the statute books; and for a season it seemed the warrant had been not merely discredited but destroyed. It had not been destroyed. It had only changed its clothes, as the warrants in these genealogies always do when the old costume becomes unwearable.

The return

It returned, in part, within biology itself — in the sociobiology that from the 1970s sought the roots of human behaviour in evolved genetic dispositions, and in the recurring controversies, the bell-curve disputes most loudly, that proposed to ground the gaps between classes and groups in heritable intelligence. Some of this was serious science improperly extended; some was the old warrant in a lab coat; the work of telling which is which is exactly the discipline these studies try to practise. But the warrant's largest return was not biological at all. It migrated, as the companion volume showed, into *economics* — into the picture of the market as a natural, self-correcting, near-evolutionary order whose outcomes are the verdict of an impartial process and whose inequalities are therefore not to be tampered with. The fittest firms survive; the market selects; intervention is interference with a quasi-natural mechanism. The vocabulary of biology has been quietly swapped for the vocabulary of competition and efficiency, but the move is the one this genealogy began with: a made arrangement reclassified as a discovered nature, placed beyond the reach of politics. Even here honesty requires a distinction the careful thinkers insisted upon — Hayek, who gave the market its most sophisticated "evolved order" defence, explicitly *rejected* biological Social Darwinism and rested his case on the cultural evolution of rules rather than the breeding of men; the resonance between the two is genealogical, a family likeness in the move, not an identity of doctrine. The warrant is most respectable in its honest hands. It does its damage in the popularised, preaching versions that drop the qualifications and keep the authority.

The verdict returned to politics

What, in the end, does the genealogy claim, and what does it refuse to claim? It refuses, at full strength, the genetic fallacy. To show where an idea came from is not to refute it: that the struggle for existence entered biology from Malthus does not make natural selection false, and evolution remains the established and magnificent science it is. The genealogy disarms one specific thing and one only — the *defence from nature*, the move that takes a fact about the biological world and converts it into a command about how human society must be arranged, smuggling an *ought* out of an *is* and using the smuggled ought to place a human arrangement beyond human argument. That move was never science. It was always a verdict pronounced by men and attributed to nature, and the attribution was the trick.

And the trick was not, for the most part, a conspiracy. This has been the burden of the whole account. No cabal convened to invent Social Darwinism and impose it on a credulous public. An economist wrote a pamphlet to win an argument; a philosopher built a system and coined a phrase; a naturalist published a science; and an age that had lost its old warrant for inequality, and had new inequalities urgently in want of one, *found* in these materials exactly the sanction it required — and the men whom the sanction favoured promoted it, funded it, taught it, and repeated it until it became the air, while the readings that favoured no one powerful were left unfed. That is how ideas are selected: not in a meeting, but in a market, where the currency is utility to those with the means to buy. To see this is to be returned the thing

the warrant was built to take away — the knowledge that the verdict of nature was a human verdict all along, wearing nature's robe, and that what men have arranged and called inevitable, men may argue with, and amend, as the political thing it always was.